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Oregon: Award-Winning Eugene Grower Adam Jacques Leads The Way For Medical Cannabis

It's been a heavy week for Adam Jacques. As he tours around the 40-plus-acre farm in west Eugene where he cultivates some of the most highly regarded medical cannabis in the world, Jacques, always outgoing, nonetheless seems weighted by sadness — not exactly downbeat but weary, like a man recently smacked by the cosmos.

Atop the 100-hour week Jacques and his team routinely put in breeding medical cannabis for patients, he's also been filling out the reams of bureaucratic and legal paperwork required to go recreational, a move he's making largely to fund the healing side of his profession. It's this professional work — the breeding of strains with record-breaking percentages of cannabidiol or CBD, one of the major medicinal elements in pot that, unlike THC, does not get you high — that led Canna Magazine to give Jacques the Most Influential Grower in the Northwest award at its Seattle conference this past August.

But there's business, and then there's the business of healing, with its hard-won triumphs and inevitable losses. On the morning of Jan. 3 came news of the passing of Frank Leeds, a cancer patient with whom Jacques had been working closely for the past five years. It was his work with Leeds — and in particular the breeding of "Frank's Gift," a high-CBD strain of cannabis — that opened up for Jacques the possibility of turning his green gifts toward the services of healing.

Although deeply saddened by Leeds' death, Jacques says he celebrates the man's life and what that might mean for other cannabis patients down the line. "It opened up so many doors for us to be allowed to help so many that were needing the effects of medical cannabis without the feeling of being stoned," Jacques says of treating Leeds. "While I was constantly consistently growing high-quality THC cannabis, the ability to help so many more people became available. It was a huge turning point in who I was as a person and grower. I cried and celebrated that day."

Since this breakthrough, Jacques has been propelled to the forefront of the medical cannabis movement. And he isn't just pulling down awards. Just this year he turned his efforts to helping Leni, a young girl immobilized by severe seizures, and he remains an outspoken proponent of protecting the Oregon Medical Marijuana Program from legislative assault and the encroachment of pharmaceutical corporations looking to cash in.

Leni's Story

Listening to Jacques, it's difficult to see his transformation from a darn good Eugene weed grower to an industry-leading medical cannabis provider as anything less than life-altering. "We're all people and we all have our lives and our life stories," Jacques says. "I can't say I'm proud of who I've been. I was not the person I wanted to be. Helping people, that's what I've needed all along. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning."

Jacques says it was this awakening to the way his talents as a grower could help people that's set him on the healing path. "It's a damn real thing," he says of this newfound sense of purpose. "I'm finally to the point where I feel like I'm doing something that makes a difference in people's lives."

Certainly Amy Young would agree. Along with her husband and four children, Young moved to Oregon from their home outside Montgomery, Alabama, this past August just to get her daughter Leni closer to Jacques, who she calls a "legend" among medical marijuana patients. Leni, now 4, was born with only a portion of her frontal lobe intact, the result, Young says, of a huge stroke in utero.

"By her one-month checkup, it was very clear to us that something was different," Young says. "She couldn't calm down, she would cry and she had a hard time nursing."

At just 34 days old, Leni underwent a cranial ultrasound at a hospital in Birmingham, during which her condition

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was discovered. At that point, Young and her husband were told it was only a matter of time.

"You cannot have that much brain damage and not have seizures," she explains. "At that point, she's got a neurologist, a cardiologist, a speech and occupational therapist, because we know there's stuff coming down the road."

Medically and developmentally, Young says Leni continued to progress "almost like a normal child" until the seven-month mark, at which point the difficulties started. "Within a few days, we were in-patient at Children's Hospital," she says of visiting the University of Alabama facilities. "She couldn't stop seizing." Leni was given what Young says were "almost adult doses" of anti-epileptic meds. Young and her husband were told to call palliative care, who suggested the couple consider withholding nutrition.

"They told us she was dying," Young says. "They didn't think she'd make it to Christmas, and it was August."

The Youngs decided to take Leni home instead of placing her in hospice, because "anything that they could do, we could do," Young says. "We went home to snuggle her and love her and follow her lead, whatever it would be." Family flew in from around the country to say their goodbyes.

And then, Young says, "Leni surprised us." The anti-epileptic drugs seemed to slow down her seizures, though the infant was still having between five and 20 tonic-clonic (or gran mal) seizures a day, while suffering a series of myoclonic or smaller seizures in-between as well as "absents," which Young describes as "like a skip in a record player."

Despite surviving, Leni now seemed locked into an almost vegetative state. "She had stopped moving at all," Young says. "She had stopped making any vocal noises either. We had to gauge her mood by her breathing. That went on for a good six months. She would be still and didn't make a noise. That was scary."

As happens, Young and her husband began communicating with other parents of special needs kids, seeking alternative options for care. They began hearing about epileptic children being treated with cannabis oil, and came across the much-publicized story of "Charlotte's Web," the high-CBD cannabis extract named after Charlotte Figi, a 9-year-old with Dravet syndrome whose seizures were reduced with the medicine. The Youngs joined a group of parents in lobbying the Alabama Legislature to pass Carly's Law, which in March of 2014 legalized the medical use of "marijuana-derived oil" in Alabama.

Despite the fact that a neurologist recommended Leni as a subject for an early study of pharmaceutical cannabis in Alabama, the child was excluded from the study because, Young says, "she was not taking enough pharmaceuticals" — not in dosage, she clarifies, but in sheer count. The Youngs were up against the wall again; due to the severity of Leni's condition, they were nervous about waiting for the FDA and DEA to sign off on the new law.

Alabama being, well, Alabama, and not among the most progressive states in the Union, especially when it comes to marijuana prohibitions, the Youngs realized they couldn't risk going underground to get Leni treated. "So we made the decision that we have to move," she says. "We gotta go somewhere where we can get this stuff, was our first thought. OK, where do we go? Who has been doing this the longest?"

They began shopping around states with medical cannabis programs, looking hard at Colorado Springs, where a large community of special-needs parents has sprung up thanks to that state's early passage of medical cannabis legislation. Then Young's husband, Wayne, landed a job in Portland, and the family decided to move to nearby Newberg. They arrived this past June.

"At this point," Young says, "I contact a couple friends that I trust who are part of the movement. And everybody came back with the same name. He's like a legend," she adds, speaking of Jacques. A mutual friend hooked Young up with Adam Jacques' wife, Deborah, who runs the Oregon Microgrowers Guild, the couple's medical cannabis dispensary in west Eugene. Young told Deborah about Leni. "Deborah and I started talking online," she says, "and that was all she wrote."

Simply leaving Alabama seemed to have a beneficial effect on Leni's condition; there was a 20-percent decrease in seizures, which Young says might have something to do with differences in barometric pressure. The family was careful in moving forward, making sure Leni and the Jacques got comfortable with each other before starting her on doses of cannabis oil. "We also wanted them to get to know her," she says, "so that they would have a better idea of what they were dealing with."

In August, they started Leni on a mix of cannabis oils that contained high counts of CBD as well as THC-A, a nonactive form of THC that doesn't get you high. According to Young, they began with "an incredibly small dose that both Adam and we thought would do nothing, and within the first hour it was very clear that she could focus on things further away. The whole thing happening instantly is not crap. It's real."

Before the end of the first week of treatment, Leni was watching Disney's Frozen and singing along, Young says, "whereas before she couldn't focus on the movie." She began holding her head up. She started using her hands.

"We bought toys this Christmas," Young says. "It's crazy."

Leni's older brother, Thomas, says it was "mind-blowing" to see the immediate results of his sister's treatment with cannabis oil. "She was a zombie when she came here," he explains. "You can't argue with what you see." Thomas, 23, now helps Jacques out at the farm.

"It's beyond anything we ever could have imagined," Amy Young says of the effects of the oil. Leni's seizures have reduced from several big ones a day, strung together with smaller attacks, to one seizure every four to six weeks, Young says, and all of the smaller ones are now gone.

"She's also trying to stand on her own," Young goes on, "and rolling over with purpose. She's making new sounds. She is incredibly engaged in everything, whereas before she spent an awful lot of time in her own world. She

smiles. She giggles. Her cognitive abilities are improving every day."

What's more, the Youngs have decreased Leni's anti-epileptics by 20 percent, with no increase in oil dosage, no notable side effects and, most importantly, no increase in seizures. "Adam gave me my child back," she says. "We have this happy little girl. Her quality of life is pretty wonderful."

Cautious Optimism

When it's suggested that Leni's turnaround is nothing short of a miracle, Young grows adamant. "Don't say that word!" she blurts with a laugh. This makes sense. To paint Leni's transformation in loaves-and-fishes terms does a subtle disservice to the ongoing evidence of the benefits of medical cannabis, which remains a massively uncharted region of healing. It puts the freeze on the seriousness of the situation. What's more, proclaiming miracles offers psychic ammo to detractors, couching any medical advances in hippy-dippy mysticism and making them, therefore, easier to dismiss.

Jacques cautions that cannabis, no matter how miraculous-seeming the results, is not a cure. "It's another medication to improve somebody's quality of life," he says. "And it seems to do that in spades, especially with these kids. And it's fantastic." As one of the international leaders in the CBD-strong cannabis movement, Jacques finds himself part of a vague vanguard of holistic healers — part doctor, part cultivator and part spokesman for an ancient-new medicine that is still fitfully breaking into the mainstream.

In the latter regard, Jacques remains cautiously optimistic and skeptically realistic about the recent advances in medical cannabis, noting that much remains to be done in terms of legislation, scientific research and cooperation with the established medical community. He says, for instance, that he is nervous about the advance into the industry of pharmaceutical giants like GW Pharma, which is researching the means of breaking cannabis down into its constituent parts for synthesis.

"They are not using the full cannabis plant extracts and are pushing CBD-only solutions," he says of pharmaceutical companies seeking to streamline and monopolize cannabis extracts. "By fractioning off cannabinoids and rebuilding them into what they want, they can finally patent a plant and hold patients hostage as to what they can legally use and what their insurance will cover. It does not work anywhere near as well as actual raw cannabis extractions, but the money and influence they have are attempting to make it the only choice."

Jacques says he's particularly wary of current pressure on the Oregon State Legislature to fold the medical cannabis market into the recreational market, effectively doing away with medical cannabis providers. Should the medical cannabis program go away, Jacques notes, his capacity to work with kids like Leni would be abolished, reducing him to a seller who cannot make a recommendation on treatment for fear of legal repercussions. "The fact is, people can't go into rec stores and ask for advice," he says.

"Without us sticking up for ourselves, we're going to get crushed," Jacques says of medical cannabis providers. "That's what's already happening in other states," he adds, explaining that should the medical marijuana program be done away with, Big Pharma could step in "and take our genetics, take the work we've been doing and get us out of the industry. They want us to be recreational."

Jacques, who is now up for the worldwide Most Influential Person in the Industry award at the CannAwards International conference Feb. 16 in Puerto Rico, says he considers any recognition he receives as a mere means to an end: promoting and furthering public understanding of the medical benefits of cannabis in the lives of folks like Frank Leeds and Leni Young.

"It's kind of at the go-big or go-home point," he says of the fight against Big Pharma and other forces seeking to co-opt the medical cannabis program. "Everything's a means to an end, and that end is helping people. I can win all the awards I want, but it doesn't seem to matter to those people. I'll never stop. I'm going to keep doing what's right."

The Road Ahead

Leni's mom Amy Young is equally vocal about the need to preserve and expand upon the current medical cannabis program. "From here, everybody deserves the opportunity to have their doctor dictate their treatment instead of their zip code," she says, adding that her family had to move 2,700 miles to avoid legal repercussions for treating Leni with cannabis.

As of now, Jacques says he believes he has the largest library of CBD-dominant strains in the world, including the highest CBD percentage yet tested, and he continues to "dial in" more effective oil combinations for patients like Leni as well as breeding new strains all the time. "I still have huge breeding projects going on right now," he says. "Nobody's going as hard at it as I am."

Jacques says he hasn't decided whether he'll travel to Puerto Rico next month for the CannAwards, which doesn't mean he shies from embracing his celebrity as a CBD big dog. At the August conference in Seattle, he rolled up in overalls amid the suit-and-tie set to accept his industry award, looking to "take it back to Eugene, Oregon, where it really belongs," he says. "I feel that we've got the best cannabis and the best growers in the world."

Along these lines, Jacques says he looks forward to gearing up for the advent of Oregon's recreational marijuana program. He has plans for a new greenhouse on his property, and his grow rooms are currently cycling through fragrant crops of frosty bud. "I want to be a name out there," Jacques says, smiling. "I'd love to be the Ninkasi of cannabis. I think that would be great," because, he adds, any income earned from rec could further support his medical cannabis pursuits.

"Every day the majority of my time is spent working on the patients," Jacques says. "I get paid by helping people. I'm not making any money. I'm not growing this stuff to grow money. Intention in the universe is everything."



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